

Shenandoah

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Harris Downey

THE WOMAN

WHO LOVED FLOWERS

When Miss Lettie Adams' house was torn down this spring, nearly everybody in town was thankful—especially those who lived on Convention Street, even though the new utilities building going up on its site would bring a deal of traffic into the neighborhood. It was as if the District Attorney had at last stricken from his books an old charge against them all that could never be prosecuted because the evidence, at best, was just hearsay.

And people were curious too. They'd stand round the sidewalk or even stop their automobiles in the middle of the street to stare at the bulldozer knocking down the trees or scuffing up the azaleas as if they were weeds. (The japonica trees—some twenty feet high—had been dug up last fall and carted away by whoever had enough money to buy up that small part of Miss Lettie's patience.)

You'd think that the bulldozer, knocking down the magnolia with ten or so thrusts, could just go at the house in low gear and leave a shambles of wood and brick for the garbage trucks. But it took more than three weeks to clear that half-acre. Before it was over, people who had never lingered in Convention Street all their lives would stand round and look into one another's eyes with questions ready for any revelation: *Didn't I know it?* and *Now, don't you see?* At any moment—after the pull of a chain, after the ninth stroke of an axe—there'd surely come a surprise: Miss Lettie herself, in a long flannel gown, falling out of a window as the side of her house came tumbling; or old letters, big as

cinemascope, flying in the March wind among the scurrying blossoms of wistaria.

You'd think it was the same people all day long waiting and watching; but, of course, people came and went. Yet they were like watchers of a night taking turns, for their expectation was the same. When the workmen would draw back and take cover, the people on the sidewalk would step backwards into the street but hold their stare against the vine-littered house. And when the top gallery or a gingerbread gable, crackling and falling, would hang in mid-air amid a tangle of vine, they'd look round to one another and, stranger to stranger, would say, "The whole house is tied together by that damned wistaria!" Else, they'd just stare into one another's eyes and in the silence of the stare feel close to each other. In any case, the demolition of Miss Lettie's old house, like catastrophe, made intimate and confidential those strangers who, in the routine of living, would never lift their eyes to one another in Third Street.

Miss Lettie had been dead for more than a year. And before the firemen axed in the door to discover her at the bottom of the stairs, she had been dead for five days, a crystal pitcher shattered around her and a black-and-white kitten, too weak to cry, lying near her head.

"She stole it! She stole it!" Mrs. Whipple, defiant of pick-axes and stench, had lifted the lank hungry kitten and held it against her bosom as though the wavering paws and the inaudible mew were the horror. "It's my kitten. It's *mine*!" she had cried.

That summer, some cousin came and took all Miss Lettie's belongings away—chiffoniers, sofas, brass beds. In the routine of going out and coming back home, Convention Street passed up and down—bending under the dense growth that overhung the sidewalk and, at night, crossing to its other side lest the moon was *really* toppling on the steep vine-covered roof. Under the yaupon leaning down like witches over a cauldron, someone set up the sign: *New Site of Istrouma Utilities*. And in late fall, somebody's niggers (the niggers themselves didn't know *whose*) came

and dug up the japonicas and took them away—maybe back to Natchez, where they came from in the first place as little slips stuck into the moisture of an Irish potato.

Now, in the spring of March, the half-acre of land was a maze and canopy of purple racemes smelling like incense. The demolition men drew back to question the power of their bulldozers and saws as they stared at the insistence of flowers. In the frenzy of demolition, wistaria fell into the erratic patterns of the wind, blanketed the sidewalk and lay crushed in the street. It lay on the caps and shoulders of the workmen. When the magnolia fell in a slow-motion crash into the border of shrubs, a sudden wind caught up a cloud of the purple bloom and, lifting it higher than the magnolia and stood, moved it over the street, and then leapt away. Even the workmen looked up in wonder. The purple cloud seemed to hang there, high in the air over the street.

All her life, Lettie Adams had loved flowers. When she lived in Mrs. Calhoun's boarding house, she had a flowerbox outside her one window upstairs; and downstairs, in the grassless, paper-littered yard, she grew annuals—for the vandalism of the neighborhood's hundred children and for her own despair at the zinnia bed wrestled in and at the red and yellow four-o'clocks spooled on a hundred grass stems before she got back from work at five-twenty.

She worked in Redburn's Department Store then. There, three stories above the shadows of Third Street, in one special Ready-to-Wear window that caught the afternoon sun between the Fidelity Bank and Sear's, she grew narcissus and hyacinths in gravel and water. Miss Lettie a hundred times a day sighed: *My poor things!* The others forgot at the lifting of a Shantung. But Miss Lettie remembered. Flowers, even *trying* to be flowers, were a marvel to Miss Lettie.

She was forty-nine years old when her Uncle Willet died and left her his grand gingerbread house on Convention—its half-acre a challenge for her desire of magnolias and climbing roses and redbud and dogwood and all the small things like cracker-jack surprise crying out of obscure corners: *Look at me, Miss Lettie.*

Miss Lettie! Violets and jonquils! Things that grew year after year and vied with one another for their flowers in the sun! Her heart had leapt in ecstasy for the probabilities of this house and its great yard.

But something had gone wrong from the very first. Her tulips had bloomed. Even her lilacs had flowered—miraculously, impossibly—in this hot summertime that the calendar called spring. But passers-by looked at her on her knees in the border and did not speak. They looked, not in admiration, but in hatred. On her knees, she half turned, looked at the trowel in her hand like a question, then sought the eyes gazing upon her. *How lovely!* she expected. And she had rehearsed an answer: *Would you like some cuttings of these?* But always the gaze went quickly away, leaving an unuttered curse hovering around her like the smell of cape jasmine.

She had meant her yard to be a place of violent color in Convention; she had meant for people to pause, and admire and, after compliments, go away with a sack full of bulbs and a heart, like a watered hyacinth, about to burst into an answer of dreams. Yet each day, or many times a day, she had wept over the calendulas and the pansies stomped into the earth or scuffed up by their roots—all her labor in vain and darkness falling on the naked roots she had so tenderly placed under the soil. In hysteria, she had screamed to children and dogs: *Stay out of my yard!* and the passing-by eyes, looking over office-tired shoulders, had silently answered: *You old fool! You selfish and vicious old fool!*

Yet, could these be the reasons? Her *neighbors* screamed. They came running to their trash-cans, brandishing an apron against dogs. They boxed the ears of their children for all the street to see. They scowled and shook fingers against the children of the next block, idling by. They yelled across the street to one another, complaining of the mailman's hatred of dogs, of the water-people digging up the pavement. But they turned their eyes from their own children pushing one another into her hedge, from their dogs watering her quince, from their chickens scratching away the mulch of azaleas. They would seek one another's eyes—across a

fence, across the street—and, clutching together their stares like a handshake, would bare their teeth in a smirk of conspiracy: *That woman! What's she up to anyways?*

Then one morning, after seasons of uprooted and mutilated things, she mixed rat-poison in ground meat. She rolled the mixture into little balls which she took into her yard and set among the border where the chickens scratched and around the plants that the dogs sniffed. Of course, the children were the worst; yet, no matter her anguish, she could never tie poisoned lollipops to the kumquat tree. The children! . . .

Her mission accomplished, she stood in the middle of her kitchen and listened. Sirens might sound and uniformed men fall out of balloons into her garden. She lifted her hand, saw the trowel that had carried the deadly balls. It had clung to her like fingerprints. She cast it away. It struck the stove and fell to the floor: *Alarm! Alarm!* Her heart beat violently. She put out her hand and braced herself against the table. The whole street was a fraternity against hooligans. Why was she, who knew her boundary and kept it, among the hooligans? Was it because she never encroached?

In that silence she saw the hens lying dead on their backs, their claws that scratched up her iris now folded in death. She saw the dogs (trying to vomit) stretch their feet, lift their backs, and fall in convulsion.

"No!" she cried.

She ran out the back door. The evening was violent with color. But in the flowering border, darkness lay. At her intrusion, it arched its back slowly and, as she stared, leapt up the pines. Standing aghast at the indifferent darkness, she began to weep. She wept for the agony of wordless things: her iris uprooted to the winter's chill, the innocent dogs retching for the searing flames in their blood. Her fists clenched and her forearms held tense down her long bony thighs, she wept for her own inarticulate agony.

The shadows leapt from the pines. High in the sky, they bit the tentacles of light and let them drop, splashing red, into the rising darkness. Her eyes blurred with tears, Lettie Adams fell on her knees and with fitful hands searched the mulch of the dark

border for the little balls of contrition that minutes before had been agents of justice.

One April morning Lettie Adams, still believing it was love that made her grow flowers, stood at her bedroom window and looked down on her quince filled with blossoms. Then she looked at the low picket fence that last summer she built between her yard and the banquette. It had been no nightmare of two men with hammers beating back the pickets from the rail; for all the pickets were unloosed, lying back. And the child! He, too, had been real. Hair as yellow as jonquil, he had fallen upon a picket as he leapt over the fence.

What time is it? What day is it?

She was about to turn from the window when she saw four women step from the Whipple lawn and come double-file on the banquette. These were women whom she had meant for her friends. She could tell by their gestures and glances (she could tell by their disparate dress, as of women who had heard the cry *Fire!*) that they were coming to her. Perhaps the Anderson child had broken a rib! Had punctured a lung! Had died in the night.

She dropped her kimono to the floor. She searched through the closet, pushing dresses down the rail as if she were in Redburn's with a cantankerous client. When the bell rang, she had on her good stockings and her black pumps; she was adjusting the blue voile round her hips and reaching for the zipper. Surely they had paused at the bell, had bowed their heads together in some final and darksome conference. Her fingers through her hair, she nearly tripped down the stairs. The tight pumps set her off-balance. Yet, when the bell rang again in its three impatient spurts, she had her hand on the knob.

She flung back the door.

Mrs. Whipple stared. In her flopping black hat (she was dressed for an afternoon tea), Mrs. Whipple lifted her head, lifted a white-gloved hand under the brim of her black velour hat, and said: "Miss Adams." Beside her were Mrs. Faulk and Mrs. Learner: both in house dresses, both tall and obese, both belligerent, both ready to snipe in verification of whatever Mrs. Whipple might say. Be-

hind them all stood Mrs. Anderson, hesitant and apologetic, her hand on the post of the gallery.

Lettie just stood. *Of course, she was Miss Adams.* There was no need for answer. Whatever they said, whatever questions they asked, whatever accusations they made—silence and a questioning stare must be her answer. Standing at the door, her hand yet on the knob, she neither answered nor moved.

"Miss Adams," Mrs. Whipple repeated. "Little Ronnie Anderson—" Without turning round, she pointed a white-gloved finger to Mrs. Anderson leaning against the post of the gallery. "Yesterday you chased Mrs. Anderson's son Ronnie with a stick."

Lettie Adams saw Mrs. Anderson leaning against the post—her fingers pulling the hair at the nape of her neck, her eyes lowered to the top step. Then she looked into the uncertain and wild eyes of Mrs. Whipple. *Off to a tea party?* Oh, the things she could say! The things she could do! She could slam the door and cry *Murder!* Yet, she stood motionless and silent.

"His poor chest is black and blue," Mrs. Whipple said. "But for the grace of God, he might have been mortally wounded."

From her kitchen window, Lettie, sipping coffee, had seen the golden-haired child, alone and lovely, crouch through the border. She had watched him a long while, had admired his gold hair catching the sun under the April-thin leaves. She had seen him, as tentative and inquisitive as a kitten, turn his shining head from side to side, raise his eyes, then search round the narrow space of his assurance. He was imitating the older boys, who were at school. He was the kitten shuffling his haunches as he stared up at the bird in the top branch of the tree and remembered some ancient necessity. *Poor child!* she had thought. And, then, just at that moment, she had seen him, desperate of purpose, leap upon the violets and pull them up by their roots. She had snatched up her walking stick, had run down the back steps, and, waving the stick to the air, had screamed, *Get out of my yard!*

"Our dogs and our chickens—we might ignore them," Mrs. Whipple was saying. "But when the very lives of our children—"

"We're Christian people." It was Mrs. Learner, saying her say.

"We understand. We forgive. But when the lives of our children—."

"When it's not safe for even a little boy—," Mrs. Faulk began. Then she faltered.

"Miss Adams," Mrs. Whipple said.

Mrs. Anderson had dropped her hand from the post. She had gone down the steps. She was standing at the walk, putting a hand to a knocked-out picket of the fence.

"Miss Adams," Mrs. Whipple repeated. "We decided not to go to the Council until we came to you face-to-face. We decided it was only the neighborly thing to do."

Mrs. Faulk, lifting a finger between her two friends, said, "But except when our own children—."

"Miss Adams!" Mrs. Whipple, in her deep vibrant voice, was demanding silence from her regents. "Miss Adams, we've come here to warn you." With her gloved hand, she lifted the flopping brim of her hat as if it were a wayward hair over her forehead. "If henceforward you molest even a dog or a cat or a chicken, we will bring charges against you." Her hand came from the brim of her hat and was pointing a finger against the immobile and pale face of Lettie Adams. "We are organized. We'll enlist the whole street against you."

Beyond the necks, like three trees struggling together, Lettie saw Mrs. Anderson at the gate—her hand still on the loosed picket, her other hand at her temple, and her gaze upon the green-slimed bricks of the banquette. Iris roots lay in pain against the chill air and violets, in the branches of yaupon, hung dying.

Lettie's hand was still on the knob. Many answers to Laura Whipple's threats rose in her mind and veered away. Her mind, full of caution and doubt for so many years, was like water. She didn't dare speak. It was her body that answered: her feet moved her back into the hall and her hand, clenching the knob, slammed the door.

It was a March morning. *God, how the years go!*

Lettie Adams stood at the window of her bedroom. *Lettie Adams. Age, 74. Interment in Magnolia. No flowers. No services.*

She put her hand to her neck and thrust back the scraggly grey hair. *Effie Lettie Adams*, that's how it would read in *The Advocate* and on the telephone poles. *No friends, please!*

For twenty years Lettie Adams had let her garden go wild. The borders were thickened to jungle. The lawn was a mass of privet and blackberry vines. For twelve years she had been retired from her job; and the crystal containers that she had brought home in somebody's car were still on the front gallery filled with their gravel for the sow-bugs to hide under.

The doors were locked. All the windows were closed, and the air in the house was still, smelling of wistaria.

From the border the searching tentacles had come through the blackberry vines and the grass, had climbed the house, and, after fitful meandering, had caught the stair. Wistaria runners, pale as grass under a stone, twined round the rail, and, growing downward, spread their limp leaves to the dark air of the hall. Here and there, touching the steps, they turned again up the bannisters and, descending the rail, stretched out their flowering racemes.

For a whole generation the wistaria had spread itself as industriously as hate; and layered itself through the border, over the lawn, and under the house into countless new vines—all with identical flowers and leaves, all with the compulsion to send tentacles creeping through grass, under mold, around concrete and iron and wood, to root themselves and turn back. Runners had rooted themselves even in the leaf-clogged gutter of the house and sent new runners searching through the rotting shingles of the gable. The wistaria flourished even on the sun-dried roof and down the bannister to a sunless hall; for countless vines were linked together by a circuit of arteries as vast and as various as desire.

Another April, Lettie thought as she stood at the upstairs window of her room. *Another spring!* Round her shoulders she clutched the counterpane that she had pulled from the foot of her bed as she rose, adjusting her flannel gown around her cold thighs and sticking her crooked toes into her slippers. A pillow over her head, she had thought she heard voices along the path that Charlie made through the weeds as he came each Monday and

Friday to hand her the groceries at the front door. But the voices had been only the cry of the blue jays.

The day had risen like a thousand bells ringing clear. She had held her head under the pillow and tried to recall the nightmare that the light had broken. She had gone through the old unfinished dreams: the wistaria wrapping her round in the brass bed; the chill rain falling upon her as she lay in the bed with the umbrella above her dissolving away into a skeleton of prongs. Trying to remember, trying to stitch her old nightmares together into some sort of sequence, she had called up the old dream of the Whipples with axes and shovels beating away the wistaria that lifted its tentacles like a giant octopus over their heads, that wound round their feet, wound round their bodies and, tripping them, wound round their necks to still the screams. Mrs. Whipple, a young woman running up and down the border crying to the aged and gaunt Mrs. Whipple she became: *Call the Fire Department! Call the Police!* The wistaria flapping its tentacles like flames! The Whipple boys, hatchets in hand, ducking the axes and the admonishing cries of the men they had grown to! Each Whipple, multiplying the force doubleganger-wise, was here like twins of time swinging the hysterical weapons. Among them, the three indistinguishable women that the Whipple boys enlisted through marriage! Scurrying behind them, their anonymous off-spring with little tin shovels and painted buckets filled with sand. And above them, the spiralling green tentacles veering shovels and hoes to leap through the air and catch the shingles of the Whipples' white roof.

The dreams, coming at daylight, were never finished. Though the blinds were drawn, daybreak always awakened Lettie Adams. And though she turned her good ear to the pillow and pulled the covers over her head, bird-call and expectation kept her awake.

Lettie Adams, turning from the window of her room, went to the bed. "Pussy cat," she said softly. "Pussy cat." She patted her hand over the covers. "Is that you?" She lifted the quilt cautiously. And there, between the quilt and the top sheet lay the black-and-

white kitten. He looked up, his grey-green eyes hardly inquisitive. Then, stretching his forepaws toward a yawn, he buried his muzzle in the fur of his legs and went back to sleep. Lettie touched his moist nose and drew her fingers over the childish diamond between his black ears.

Weeks before, she had found the kitten among the weeds of her yard chasing the shadows of finches. One of Laura Whipple's countless kittens! She had snatched it up in hatred and, in the kitchen, before she flung it to the floor, she had squeezed it until it cried. . . . Now, she lowered the quilt tenderly upon it.

She needed tea. Yet she went again to the dust-grimed window of her room and looked down on her tangled yard and the street.

The brilliant sun fell around the countryside but, like a parasol, left her house and her yard in a chill shade. In neglecting her yard, she had wedded herself to a purpose that, somehow, she had forgotten; that, somehow, had changed, had become as apart from her desire as the purpose of the vine—and as unpredictable.

But here they came! God! there was a whole score of them today. And with them two strangers—*two* councilmen this time.

Lettie drew the counterpane over her shoulders and, with both hands, clutched it under her neck. How had she known to wait at the window and look down and remember? When the sun awakened her, hadn't the vine been humming a warning round the rafters?

She stared at them coming. It was like the spring day, years ago, when she discovered the stem of a vinca holding a whorl of blue above the mulch of the border. Then her heart had leapt, for that was in the years when even the meanest flower was an ecstasy.

Seasons before that blue whorl, she had planted the thin vinca cuttings here and there in the places where they might bloom like Easter-egg surprise. She had battled a long drought with a parsimonious hose; had dreamed of velvet green leaves and of flowers so symmetrical, so shining blue, that they seemed to spin in the air like electrical wheels. Other seasons had passed and, in expectation of fringed tulips or a new-patented rose, she had forgotten the vinca. Then, that spring day, hovering a rake

over the mulch, she saw the flower—as perfect as any wallpaper bloom and as bright. She would have sworn that it whirled in its pedicel. She looked about and, poking the mulch in the old places, she saw other shining new plants. There were scores of them, all around her, all filled with little closed buds, the blue bursting through.

The cuttings, taking root, had seemed to sleep—like stubborn kittens ignoring the rolling spools and the paper pendulums. Like kittens seeking just the right measure of shadow and sun, the plants had moved about till they found their benign places. Then, like kittens attacking one's heel or scaling a tree, they lifted themselves from under the mulch, from the hollow of the elm—as if at any moment they would leap and send the finches scurrying from the grass to the trees. That night, Lettie Adams had dreamed the discarded dream: a carpet of dark leaves mewing to the moonlight and blue flowers, unwhirling, spinning endless round. . . . But that was years and years ago!

Lettie Adams screwed her toes in the toe of her slipper as she went down the stairs. Like the vinca they were coming: her adversaries—in multitude and after expectation.

Of course, they had come before, screaming sanitation—the poor little Anderson boy and his wounded chest long forgotten. It was just a week ago that they had last come, stepping through the weeds, tripping in the wistaria, scowling at the vine-covered house: Laura Whipple, Mavis Faulk, Mrs. Learner, and others, including a peach-faced young councilman dressed in a double-breasted hot suit and those strange new women who wore slacks to the store.

She had met them then as she had met them before: standing in the door, a hand on the knob, a forearm against the jam, her eyes wide in surprise and her mouth opened in silence as they spoke about their ordinances and their tractors and a bill that the city would send.

She had stared like a woman gone deaf in her solitude. A helpless old woman unjustly accused—and aggrieved! Before she had slammed the door, like an ancient and terrified Red Riding Hood,

she had seen the hatred (even in Laura Whipple) turn topsy to compassion and a sudden guilt. Oh, long ago, she had caught them! With pity like fire and guilt like a whip, she had subdued their hatred.

Cautiously, she was descending the vine-littered stair. Soon they would knock—Laura Whipple possibly. Possibly the other new councilman. But there was no hurry. She knew how she would greet them.

Times before—she had let the sun set and not turned on a light. For two or three nights in succession she had brewed her tea in darkness, had climbed the wistaria-massed stair to her bed and lain there listening to the vines humming the pity and the hate from her neighbors. A hundred times she had heard the vine writhe under the shingles at Laura Whipple's shock of being sincere: *That poor woman! Poor Miss Lettie!* Oh, how the shingles flew then! And she had heard the vines lie back as if from a passing wind and hum softly the constant hope: *At last, Lettie Adams is dead.* But for all their thoughts that the vine brought they had never come in the night to break down the door and be shocked to find her sitting up in bed, violently alive, and crying the words she had rehearsed, awake and asleep: *Murder! Intruders! Police!* They were cowards all. They would wait for the stench of her corpse to inspirit them, lest her last words be a curse.

There was a knock on the door. But Lettie picked her way down the stairs as cautiously and as slowly as ever. There was time for them to grow impatient; there was time for her to lie on the divan in the hall and adjust the counterpane round her body before they forced the faulty latch and leaned over to touch her closed eyes. She had to stifle a laugh as she leaned a hand to the newel. Ought she scream when they touched her?

The second knock sounded, with more authority than the first. Quickly she sought the divan and lay down. Then adjusting the counterpane about her, she closed her eyes. . . . So, she waited and listened, imagining herself dead, a victim of their hatred.

A month later, tripping on the vine of the stairs, she will fall headlong to the worn matting of the hall—the handle of a shat-

tered pitcher in one hand and a crush of pallid leaves in the other. Her skeleton broken somewhere, she will lie helpless and in pain. She will cry out; and her cries, like a caught bird, will strike the windowpanes and fall back—down the stairs, past her lifted fingers, and into the shadows of the velvet-dying house. From the terror of reality she will escape, countless times over, into the terror of dreams, only to awake again and again (except at last) to the incredible reality. In hours, like days, she will have time to surmise that it was she, and she alone, that the wistaria captured.

Lettie Adams, like a beetle on its back, will lift her pale bony hands above her bosom and let them drop. She will see the glimmering window grow dark and will remember her old intent of chrysanthemums like stars. She will see the window bloom again—sunflower gold and indifferent. She will hear her cries, like dry petals surrendering to the wind. Finally she will dream the wisdom that dogs and chickens and children go, like vinca, seeking a benign place; and that men go their ways as gracefully as buttercups, down a path or up a levee.

Lettie Adams, with a hand to her stomach and her leaden head to the matting, will remember the dream of her middle-age and youth: A garden that people will stare on and shake their heads and mutter: "How lovely!" She will hear the black-and-white kitten sharpening his claws on the matting. She will hear him cry for his breakfast and then, forgetting his hunger and his habit, scurry upstairs and down again, boxing with quick claws the pale stems of the vine.

Still clutching the pallid leaves in her hand, she will gape at the dark stair hovering above her like a tree in the wind and at last cry: *Let me die!* Then—her voice gone, her arms and legs amputated, even her head lolling apart from her body—she will feel the kitten on the hollow of her stomach and (as if trying to force her hand to a last touch of the silken fur) she will hear the purring slumber—a purr confident of sudden food from a trembling hand. So, wanting to turn her good ear to the song of confidence and content, she will strive to retrieve her head that had spun, like a spool, into darkness and away. Then the purring will cease. Even

the fusillade of knocks on the door will not awaken her—nor the weary kitten clawing her gown, nor the wild wind slamming back the door against the hat-tree as the firemen and the policemen step over the matting and halt aghast.

Lettie Adams now lies on the divan of the hall, the counterpane around her like a shroud. She hears the sibilant voices on the other side of the door rise in impatience (*Miss Adams! Lettie Adams!*) and then a furious boot stomping the loose boards of the gallery. *Let them force open the door. Let them intrude with violence.* She has planned a new kind of silence to conquer them now.

She hears a heavy body heave against the door. The sill is dry-rot; the old latch will never hold. Another heave and they'll be spilling over the matting. She has to squint her eyes to keep them shut. She has to clamp her lips tight, lest the loose dentures spring to the air in an explosion of laughter.

Oh, she'll send them running! When they lean over to touch her with a timid middle finger, when they mutter to the dank air: *The poor thing is dead*—then, like a trap sprung, she will bolt upright on the divan and, clutching the yellow and pink chenille against the outraged privacy of her bosom, she will stare in terror, as if at ghouls—motley in white gloves, double-breasted suits, cotton dresses, and jeans.

Marianne Moore

*Logic and the Magic Flute*¹

(impressions of a première)

Up winding stair,
here, where, in what theatre lost?
was I seeing a ghost—
a reminder at least
of a sunbeam or moonbeam
that has not a waist?
By hasty hop
or accomplished mishap,
the magic flute and harp
somehow confused themselves
with China's precious wentletrap.²

Near Life and Time
in their peculiar catacomb,
abalonean gloom
and an intrusive hum
pervaded the mammoth cast's
small audience-room.

Then out of doors,
where interlacing pairs
of skaters raced from rink
to ramp, a demon roared
as if down flights of marble stairs:

¹First telecolorcast by RCA, January 15, 1956.

²The precious wentletrap: a winding-staircase (*scalaria pretiosa*): one of any elegant usually white marine shells. (Webster)

"What is love and
shall I ever have it?"³ The truth
is simple. Banish sloth,⁴
fetter-feigning uncouth
 fraud. Trapper Love with noble
noise, the magic sleuth,
 as bird-notes prove—
 first telecolor-trove—
illogically wove
what logic can't unweave:
 you need not shoulder, need not shove.

³DEMON IN LOVE by Horatio Colony (Hampshire Press, Inc., Cambridge).

⁴Banish sloth; you have defeated Cupid's bow. (Ovid: *remedia amoris*).

Hugh Kenner

IN THE WAKE OF THE ANARCH

Pope was aware, with more than Yeatsian lucidity, that in his lifetime millenar traditions were suddenly fading. The Universal Darkness into which he gazed with such prophetic horror was no mere sensational reflex of a provincial inability to grasp the mutability of cultures. Misled by a look of gradualness, however, we suppose that *he* was misled. When Mr. Eliot reminded us that the 18th century was, "like any other age," an age of transition, he was speaking of its poetic sensibility, which "alters from generation to generation, whether we will or no," impelled by the accumulation of events, retarded by the tenacity of human habit, not a seismograph to register intellectual cataclysms but a turbid fluid medium of awareness holding in suspension their settling dust. The gradual downward sloping of the arts into the romantic century misleads us into supposing that Pope's age modulated into Shenstone's just as Dryden's modulated into Pope's; but to approach history through poetry anthologies, with an ear for the morphology of sensibility, is to apprehend not events but their protracted reverberations. Scholarly ears, attuned to this mull of sound, readily suppose that when Pope spoke of Art after Art going out he was "exaggerating magnificently" (as his Twickenham editor puts it) the death of an age which he refused to believe was like all ages mortal: a first trombonist standing up in the pit to announce the extinction of music because the phrases allotted for the passage of which he bore the burden were drawing to a close.

Yet it is easy to show that he was not exaggerating: the proof is that Pope himself became in fifty years all but unintelligible. His editors could not read him; his commentators cannot read him. Though our dictionaries contain all his words and our handbooks all his allusions, his poems have grown as inaccessible as (to exaggerate magnificently) those of the Etruscans. We are situated, since the Romantic explosion, on another planet; in the finale

to the *Dunciad* we intuit a desperate vatic urgency and applaud a pomp of sound, but suppose that the same thing is being said over and over. On the contrary: a most precise analysis goes forward, according to premises desperately in need of recovery.

She comes! She comes! the sable throne behold
Of Night primeval and of Chaos old!
Before her Fancy's gilded clouds decay
And all its varying rainbows die away.
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires . . .

The light that is being negated is no mere blurry metaphor for intelligence, but an illumination whose modes of operation are conceived with speculative exactness. Fancy stands in relation to it as sunset colors and rainbows to the sun: the clouds and rainbows not objects made visible but pretexts for a tenuous virtuosity of the luminescent principle itself, to be anticipated (Coleridge, Shelley) just after the full light has vanished. Wit in its absence is condemned to be self-luminous and transient, a fugitive display (Byron, Peacock)—

The meteor drops, and in a flash expires.

The sun of learning has set before, but in a previous Dark Age the stars held their places: an Eriugena put Greek tags in his verses, a stray monk took bearings from Virgil. But this time the primal light itself is being withdrawn from all things luminous:

As one by one, at dread Medea's strain,
The sickening stars fade off th' ethereal plain,
As Argus' eyes, by Hermes' wand oppress'd,
Closed one by one to everlasting rest,
Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,
Art after Art goes out, and all is Night . . .

The arts are stars as civilization's steering-marks, flowers as its products and ornaments, eyes as its guardians; now the flowers fade, the eyes close, the very stars are occulted. Hermes, the undoer of the many-eyed Argus, was the god of luck and wealth, the patron of merchants and of thieves: in Pope's usage, emblem of the opacities of commerce. The booksellers and the money-spinners of the City are among the efficient causes of the *Dunciad's* action.

The "Universal Darkness" that buries all is therefore a negation of a universal light concerning whose functioning Pope was willing to be more specific than elocutionists suppose. We hear about it, in fact, as early as the *Essay on Criticism*, published when he was too young (23) to have done any more than intuit a set of regnant intellectual conventions.

Unerring NATURE, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchanged, and universal Light,
Life, force, and beauty must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of Art . . .

This Light comes, by a long tradition, out of St. John's gospel: it shone in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it, it was in the beginning with God, and it was the Word, the Logos which the Romans, lacking a single term, denominated as *ratio et oratio*.

In some fair body thus th' informing soul
With spirits feeds, with vigor fills the whole,
Each motion guides, and every nerve sustains;
Itself unseen, but in th' effects remains.

These passages, to be sure, are flaccid gestures towards the conventional: but a lost convention. The identity of the Universal Light and the Universal Reason was a commonplace of a thousand sermons; St. Augustine's doctrine of human knowledge, never abandoned from the 4th century to the Cambridge Platonists, turns on this identity. The Holy Spirit, furthermore, stood to the world in the same relation as the human soul to the body; hence a tissue of analogies whereby the polysemous "Nature," divine, human, and created, could be "at once the source, and end, and test" of a human activity which paralleled that of the Divine Artificer. All this, by Pope's time, had come to be believed "in memory only, reconsidered passion;" and Pope for his part reports no visions of the light, though he talks about it with a born paraphraser's suavity. He has nothing comparable to Dante's

Chè la mia vista, venendo sincera,
e più e più intrava per lo raggio
dell'altra luce che da sè è vera,

or even Mr. Pound's

that the body of light come forth
from the body of fire . . .

He handled the ideas that were in circulation, and rubbed them smoother; he was content enough with Locke's ambience, and allowed Bolingbroke credit as a philosopher, and wrote about

strong gradations, nice dependences,
Gradations just. . .

What rouses him to visionary intensity isn't metaphysical radiance but the processional triumph of obfuscation:

She comes! she comes! . . .

The *Dunciad*, as Mr. Aubrey Williams shows in his well-mannered, vastly informative study,¹ plays its energies on a process of thickening and fattening, perceived with hallucinatory particularity: literature inertly copied from other literature, drama no longer aspiring to conceive with austere passion an action like a moving arrow, plunging instead into stupefying sensation, the stage-manager rather than the dramatist "immortal"²; the prestige of learning become an inducement for pedagogy to ally itself with advertisement and for scholarship to agitate itself like a tireless worm:

Let standard-Authors, thus, like trophies born
Appear more glorious as more hack'd and torn,
And you, my Critics! in the chequer'd shade
Admire new light thro' holes yourselves have made.

Leave not a foot of verse, a foot of stone,
A Page, a Grave, that they can call their own.

It is a terrible, compelling apocalypse, and when its detractors

¹*Pope's Dunciad, A Study of Its Meaning*. By Aubrey Williams. Louisiana State University Press. 1955.

²"Immortal Rich! how calm he sits at ease
'Mid snows of paper, and fierce hails of pease;
And proud his Mistress' orders to perform
Rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm."

As for the spectator, he goggles like a tourist in Radio City:

"Joy fills his soul, joy innocent of thought;
'What pow'r,' he cries, 'what pow'r these wonders wrought?'"

complain of spleen its champions have found nothing better to do than concede exaggeration, albeit magnificent.

One would never guess from Mr. Williams' genteel manner that he had walked into the professional Popeian's Natchez-Augustan manor with the components of a time-bomb under his raincoat. Possibly he doesn't guess it either. In his first two chapters he appears to be setting up the equipment for a lantern lecture, complete with map. The impatient reader may well start on the last four chapters, which are informative enough to discount the lecturer's tone; and then reflect that the large perspectives of learning there afforded may well be more systematically accessible to Mr. Williams' generation than they were to Pope's. As one may sail along coasts without a map, or any idea of what a map would look like, so a reader living in Pope's age would have encountered the capes and headlands of the poem with a readiness of habitual response which the historian, mistaking tradition for doctrine, can extrapolate into a statement of principle the Augustan might not have recognized. The way to profit by Mr. Williams' exposition is to transpose it into the specific assumptions behind Pope's local devices.

The chief technical device in the *Dunciad* is to mime perversity by systematically perverting what we are meant to recognize as the normative images of orderly encomium. Bentley's great paeon to the scholars affords a condensed instance:

Like buoys, that never sink into the flood—

his learning a mark to steer by, he and his fellows fixed points amid tempests and opinions; it seems a neatly predictable image, until the dénouement—

On learning's surface we but lie and nod.

In the passage about Standard-authors, the first couplet perverts into Yahooesque jubilation the regimental pride and orderly decorum of armies, the second into simian self-congratulation a tranquil pietism about the fulness of age. We are meant to recall how Waller had written,

The Soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd
Lies in new light thro' chinks that time has made;

but the plenitude of senescent wisdom gives way to its parody, the annotator's idiotic delight that new beams penetrate a text (which before his arrival on the scene had been merely an impediment to the light) every time his forefinger punches a hole in it.

Pope's way of moving mock earths requires his taking a stand on such minimal and cliché-ridden orderliness as can still be evoked; he postulates the intelligibility of created things, the normality of their symbolic function, the rationality of poetic images. We hear much about the aptness of his literary parody; but the literary order upon the prestige of which Pope depends for so many effects isn't to his mind venerable because it happens to exist, but radiant because sanctioned by those very analogies between divine and human intelligence which permit and render fructive the ready resemblances between wise men and seamarks, light and intelligence, the Playwright and God; which enable the writer to see in ordonnance an image of order, to cooperate with his material rather than fight it, and make with ease intelligible statements about the intelligible: which in short reveal a world interesting enough to write about.

When no one believed such things any longer, no one could read in depth what had been so written. The mind coming close slips over Pope's mirror-like surface, and drawing back sees reflected there its own banalities. "Not a classic of our poetry," said Arnold, "a classic of our prose." Pope opened his fourth book with a prophetic apostrophe to the powers of oblivion:

Ye Powers! whose mysteries restored I sing,
To whom Time bears me on his rapid wing,
Suspend a while your force inertly strong,
Then take at once the Poet and the Song.

It was so: a criticism which assumed that the writer situated before an opaque world expressed only himself, transformed Pope into a spiteful little hunchback.

Which is the *point d'appui* of Mr. Davie's book on syntax³. If Mr. Davie, the most gifted British critic now functioning, has

³*Articulate Energy, an Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry*. By Donald Davie. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1955.

opened up a subject for which his book isn't ambitious enough, he has gone beyond any previous theorizer in opening it up. Syntax postulates an intelligible world; whoever frames a sentence claims to have performed an analysis, corresponding in complexity to the articulation of the sentence. "Jack threw the ball and Will caught it": we have observed these activities, and concluded that they were disjunct. "Jack threw the ball to Will": either a different throw or a closer analysis.

The thriving plants ignoble broomsticks made,
Now sweep those Alleys they were born to shade.

—syntactic neatness miming a perception that Fortune's wheel can turn with headlong precision. But an arrangement like the following, though officially a sentence, corresponds to no observed architectonic of events:

There was rapture of spring in the morning
When we told our love in the wood.
For you were the spring in my heart, dear lad,
And I vowed that my life was good.

The only identifiable event ("told"; for one can't believe "vowed") buries its face in a subordinate clause shielded by a falling rhythm; while the first and third lines expend their clockwork confidence in saying nothing. The tawdry appeal the poem puts forth (it is Poem IV in I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*, where it is shown to have pleased 53 per cent of the college readers on whom it was tried) depends on a mere Gestalt of reliable words: rapture, spring, morning, love, dear lad. Any gimmickry that will set these partners jiggling in a suitably brief stanza will suffice, or any gelatine that will hold them in conjoint suspension. The syntactic machinery is plainly a sham.

Now Mr. Davie's argument is that it is not merely bad poems that trifle with counterfeit syntax in that way. It has become customary for the best poets to either (1) dispense with syntax altogether, employing "a language broken down into units of isolated words, a language which abandons any attempt at articulation," or else (2) utilize a pseudo-syntax, "syntax as music," which he analyses subtly and persuasively in his brilliant third chapter,

and which makes use of syntactic units—sentence-lengths, phrases—as elements in “a silent music, a matter of tensions and resolutions, of movements (but again not rhythmical movements) sustained or broken, of ease or effort, rapidity or languor,” playing for a sort of empathic response to a Swedish drill of movement, communicating before it is understood or even when there is nothing to understand, in which “nothing is being lifted, transported, or set down, though the muscles tense, knot, and relax as it were.”

Music flourishes in the dark; and at the end of Chapter V Mr. Davie makes it clear that he is attempting a fundamental account of the poetic strategies that have prevailed since Pope's *Great Anarch* dropped the curtain and engulfed us in the romantic night-world:

The point I want to make is this: in the 17th and 18th centuries poets acted on the assumption that syntax in poetry should often, if not always, carry a weight of poetic meaning; in the 19th and 20th centuries poets have acted on the opposite assumption, that when syntactic forms are retained in poetry those forms can carry no weight. I have sought only to make those assumptions explicit, so that we may know just what we are doing, and what we are turning our backs upon, when we agree with the symbolists that in poetry syntax turns into music. Is Pope's handling of poetic syntax really so irrelevant to the writing of poetry today? And are we really so sure of ourselves that we can afford to break so completely with the tradition he represents?

Since 20th century poetry has all along conducted its affairs on the principle that we can afford to sacrifice the 19th, Mr. Davie's lumping of these poets and those in one regretful but firm dissent seems open to the suspicion that a nostalgic post-Augustan—the same perhaps who in an earlier book praised Denham's “search not his bottom”⁴—is dreamily twitching off Modern Art. The antidote to this perhaps irrelevant suspicion would be serious and sustained examination of work by Pound, Yeats, Eliot, Dr. Williams, Miss Moore, and anyone else who is conceded to matter; but such

⁴Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, p. 64; and see Marvin Mudrick's review in *Shenandoah*, Summer 1954. The present book takes off from the seventh chapter of the earlier one.

analysis, with exceptions peripheral to the main argument, we are not shown. Dr. Williams' name is even, on its sole occurrence in the book, attached to a paragraph about naive poetics hinging on the lyric as "cry"; one knows which Williams poems one is supposed to think of, and if there were any question of Mr. Davie's being dishonest one would suppose he was banking on the reader's not having examined *Paterson*. Mr. Davie, however, is thoroughly honest; he is merely committed to certain beliefs about poetry from which the standard accounts of modern poetry diverge so strikingly as to tell their own tale. The very perpetrators and apologists of this poetry having conceded and even affirmed everything analysis could establish, their critical statements can be examined instead, and we can even extrapolate, from critic X's remarks on Poem A, what he would have to think of Poem B, which he has not considered³; or join together Susanne Langer, T. E. Hulme and Ernest Fenollosa, whose interests don't overlap, to make a sort of tripartite *advocatus diaboli* whose principles, with a little adroit give and take, will blanket twentieth century literature, and, with a little dampening, smother it. Miss Langer can be used to define the key concept, "syntax as music," the morphology of feeling without specific content, which we may facetiously graph, for example,

?...!...

Hulme champions imagery without structure, for instance

...on rose and icicle the ringing handprint...

(The example is from Dylan Thomas, on whom Mr. Davie has some exact and disabling comments.) As for Fenollosa, he applauded specific images and transitive verbs, as in Shakespeare, but has, it appears, been coopted to sanction doing without sen-

³"Is 'Stepping Westward' poetry at all? According to McLuhan it cannot be..." (p. 156). The chapter from which this is cited displays Mr. Davie at his weakest, seeking to define "What is Modern Poetry?" by playing critics against one another. This method leads him for instance (p. 160, and cf. 20, 22) to offer as a touchstone of modernity the proposition that the modern poet in specific passages can't mean just what he says, as in "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown"; and then to talk as though this formula applied to Mr. Pound, that connoisseur of epigrammatic insights on which one can lean.

tences, as, we are told, in Pound. Generally speaking, Hulme will cover the barbarous cases, Mrs. Langer the subtle; and the polemic use of Fenollosa consists in showing that his views, being illuminating but incomplete, must insofar as they have been translated into 20th century poetic practice, condemn that poetry to attempts at running on one leg.

Mr. Davie's unpromising procedure opens enough incidental doors, however, to convince even a reader unfamiliar with his many brilliant performances that he not only deserves a better account than this, but has something of fundamental usefulness to say about his professed topic. He is absolutely right in focussing our attention on the mid-18th century if we want to see the beginnings of a landslide; that was also, we recall, where Pope cautioned us to look, and we grow convinced that this advocacy of modest sobriety doesn't betoken a *taste* for the insipid but is consequent on a valid taste for order to which his perceptions, when he turns them on modern poetry, are somehow prevented from ministering. And it is obvious that the standard accounts of post-symbolist procedures are in a state of confusion, since a poetry answering in essence to those accounts would deserve all Mr. Davie's suspicions. It seems worth while to attempt some restatement.

One might begin by applauding what Mr. Davie has to say about Hulme, whose status is symptomatic of an important muddle. Pope, we saw, stood for a world interesting enough to write about; Hulme, to put his position briefly, doesn't; which may explain why he never finished any of his projects. "One could make an impressive list from the present volume alone of the works which Hulme announced he would write but didn't," notes his latest editor.⁶ He left no books, numerous notebooks and uncompleted mss. quarried by Herbert Read for the 1924 *Speculations*, a diary and a few dozen hand-to-mouth articles quarried by Mr. Hynes for the present *Further Speculations*, letters, a legend, and the memory of much conversation. He participated in the Cartesian nightmare, and described its sensations so picturesquely

⁶*Further Speculations*. By T. E. Hulme, edited by Sam Hynes, Minnesota University Press. 1955.

that they sounded like a new and authentically 20th century *Weltanschauung*. The world is random, chunky, and irreducible: he compared it to a heap of cinders. In satisfaction of an appetite, we impose words on it and pretend that their elisions and fluidities betoken a coherence in the world. This gives us the Cartesian satisfaction ("Why is it that London looks pretty by night? Because for the general cindery chaos there is substituted a simple ordered arrangement of a finite number of lights."⁷) Thus "The ideal of knowledge: all conders reduced to counters (words); these counters moved about on a chessboard, and so all phenomena made obvious."⁸ As against the chessboard method, however, the moving about of smooth counters, we have the method of poetry, which corresponds to—no, not to reality, but to *the way we really experience it*, the way we think it when we aren't ordering and smoothing our thoughts to impress someone else, or our least honest selves. Here is Hulme honestly thinking to himself:

Dancing to express the organization of conders, finally emancipated (cf. bird).

I sat before a stage and saw a little girl with her head thrown back, and a smile. I knew her, for she was the daughter of John of Elton. But she smiled, and her feet were not like feet, but. . . . [sic] Though I knew her body.

All these sudden insights (e.g. the great analogy of a woman compared to the world in Brussels)—all of these start a line, which seems about to unite the whole world logically. But the line stops. There is no unity. All logic and life are made up of tangled ends like that.

Always think of the fringe and of the cold walks, of the lines that lead nowhere. (*Speculations*, 235)

Such reflections are Hulmean pre-poetry. Hence his distinction between prose and verse: verse lets things lead nowhere; "It is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily." It is physical, primitive, and sketchy; and as Mr. Davie at this point cunningly shows, it has by this account

⁷*Speculations*, 221.

⁸*Speculations*, 230.

no use for syntax, which corresponds for Hulme to the licet and pre-ordained moves of chess. Having gotten a firm grip on Hulme, Mr. Davie then so places a fulcrum that he can uproot with one heave everything in the present-day poetic landscape: "I get the impression that Hulme's views about the nature of poetical language are the ideas most generally current, almost the standard ideas, among poets and their readers today. . . ." (p. 13; and cf. 102).

The short answer is, that whatever Hulme's vogue he can be jettisoned without embarrassment. His ideas, with their postulation of an opaque universe handled one way by "reasoners and mechanists" and another way by poets, are those of Shelley stripped of the *Defence's* jittery eloquence. If his critical reputé is high, it is because most critics still live in 1820. Of course his admirers have been claiming for 30 years that Imagism, Vorticism, Pound, Eliot, Lewis, modern poetry, the modern mind, are just applied Hulme ("...through Pound particularly," writes Mr. Hynes, "...Hulme's theories became current, and changed the face of English poetry."); but the inventors of modern letters have declined to endorse such claims. Pound in an essay called "This Hulme Business" stated flatly that his London mentor was Ford Madox Ford. Lewis treats Hulme in *Blasting and Bombardiering* as a man among other queer men, "a mere journalist with a flair for philosophy and art"; Eliot has endorsed Hulme's formulation of "the religious attitude," but apparently nothing else. Mr. Hynes strikes back by terming Pound's phraseology "inelegant," and Lewis's literary method "barbarous" while maintaining for them that air of quasi-respect required by his contention that Hulme had important followers. If they would only break down and admit that they were following him! The best Mr. Hynes can do, to round off his prefatory case, is drag out the dreary half-truths about Pound's broadcasts and Lewis's first Hitler book, to which he strikes the conventional attitude of liberal horror, and suggests that these deplorable things occurred through a too literal following of Hulme's political program; whereas Mr. Eliot, "classicist, royalist and anglo-catholic," manifests "a more logical development of Hulme's ideas." We are also told that the empty ordon-

nance of Hulme's "Lecture on Modern Poetry" is "more important" than Pound's "Mosaic imperatives," because it gives "the reasons why, the principles behind the practices which Flint and Pound advocated." How we get *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos* out of Hulme's "modern conception of the poetic spirit, this tentative and half-shy manner of looking at things" is not clarified.

Hulme is a stimulating writer, especially in the aphoristic writings he didn't publish, notably the "Cinders" section of *Speculations*, and the "Notes on Language and Style" in the new collection: so heterogeneous you can always find something you nearly agree with. His death was a loss to England: he had a persistent howitzer of a mind which ranged itself by preference on otiose nuisances; he differed from the ordinary journalist in his ability to apprehend the subtlest distinctions, and from the scrupulous philosopher in his tendency to become obsessed by them once apprehended. The survivors of his age remember him with evident affection. There is no reason to belittle him. But his views aren't sufficiently representative of significant poetic practice to have taken up, for instance, so much of Mr. Davie's attention, and it is generally by confounding the actual practice of the 20th century inventors with some Hulmean extreme that Mr. Davie is misled. Bending the rays of light, Hulme's proximity exerts an Einsteinian deformation on Mr. Davie's treatment of Fenollosa, whose seminal value ("the only English document of our time fit to rank with Sidney's *Apologie*, and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and Shelley's *Defence*, the great poetic manifestos of the past") he is admirably equipped to register. Thus he notes that Fenollosa is "as insistent as Hulme that poetry should get close to 'things,'" then supposes that the way to get at the Fenollosan essence of 'things' is to differentiate his view of 'things' from Hulme's; which is like defining dogs, in a discussion bedevilled with pigs, by asserting that they are anyway not porcine. Fenollosa, he states, "realized as Hulme did not that 'things' were bundles of energies, always on the move, transmitting or receiving currents of force." True, but off centre; though it is fair to add that Fenollosa himself, refuting blindly a Hulmean view of the universe, thought it was central.

We needn't subscribe to a buzzing vitalism to make use of Fenollosa, only to a pervading intelligibility. What Fenollosa does is install us once again in a universe where intelligibility does not need to be imposed by the mind: Pope's universe and Chaucer's, as well as Shakespeare's. Such a universe, as Mr. Davie is aware, restores the possibility of syntax to poetry; it also makes its use optional. The moment intelligible things approach one another, "webs of force" spring into being. Mr. Davie is compelled to argue that on Fenollosa's own showing "the Chinese sentence . . . does not just put things together, it moves from one to another, knitting webs of force." Hence Fenollosa's preference for transitive verbs seems essential, and it is a mistake to claim his authority for a poetic of juxtapositions; hence also a syntax indifferent to transitive verbs falls somehow outside Fenollosa's sphere. But Mr. Davie is compelled to argue in this way because he apparently supposes that the poetic microcosm is the *statement*, a linking of opacities which diction and tone, both attributes of the author, not the subject, render pregnant. But the statement can be regarded as a special case, useful whenever the "transfer of force" in question has a name: "John *threw* the ball." What a ship does to the waves has no name; so writing "The ship ploughs the waves," we operate by analogy from the plough's operation on the ground, juxtaposing two intelligibles. Formally, this sentence has a verb; but the verb is meaningless without the whole of the analogy. And by extension of this principle, Dr. Williams can write "By the road to the contagious hospital. . .", a poem about a nameless process which is wholly real though only felt as a potentiality, not a sum or sequence of actions occurring, subject-verb-object, before one's eyes, and do it with perfect lucidity with no formal verb for the first 15 lines. For the poetic microcosm isn't the statement but the Aristotelian *action*, the process by which the poem gets from its own first word to its own last word, sometimes a syntactic process, sometimes not. This action, because it occurs in arrangements of words, is an intellectual action, traced as the mind moves through the poem; and it can be called *mimesis* because it parallels the similar movements of apprehension performed by a mind moving

among intelligible things and situations, knitting webs of intelligibles. It was the possibility that the mind could so move, that Pope's Great Anarch negated. That possibility once negated, syntax, as Mr. Davie sees and brilliantly shows, is meaningless except as a binder for the stimuli of more or less subtle stock responses. But it does not follow that on every occasion when formal syntax is absent we have what Yeats described as "mere works of an heroic sincerity, the man, his active faculties in suspense, one finger beating time to a bell sounding and echoing in the depths of his own mind."

Alan Neame

Water Music

A Verse Entertainment

Dum Dianae vitrea sero lampas oritur . . .

HARLEQUINADE

In { PANTALOOON & PUNCH;
various { PIERROT & COLUMBINE with musical instruments;
boats { HARLEQUIN.

PANTALOOON: *Blown to the rippling afternoon,
A water-wandering fiddle tune;
Thin as water, ripples remote
The toneless tentative water-note;
Wind and water ripple accord
To twig, to cricket, to whispered word
And, thin as water ripples are thin,
To the tentative tone of the violin.*

PIERROT: Let the companion hold the book,
While I unfold an air of Glueck,
Read at sight a sonatina . . .
This motet of Palestrina,
Can you sing the treble line
To my ground-bass, Columbine?
Will you pass me my recorder,
Columbine?

PUNCH: Beyond the border
Of the audient world she's fled.
Glimpses of a radiant head
Pillowed in the water-sedges
Blind her to the ciphered pages.
Pierrot's pleadings go ignored.

Carolling to a hidden world
Of *unintellectual* beauty,
She retires from his pursuit.

. . . .

COLUMBINE WOOS THE GOLDEN HEAD WITH A MADRIGAL:

Love is a City and a State
Where only mutual Passions move;
When Fair for Fine grows passionate,
He instantly responds with Love.

*When she burns,
The Urns of Hymen
Straight enkindled are;
His mutual Star
Burns with an equal Fervour.*

THE GOLDEN HEAD OF HARLEQUIN REPLIES:

Sing, all you Citizens of Love,
There is no happier State than this:
To know that Love will not remove
Until the Lover tire of his.

*When he tires,
The Fires of Cupid
Straight extinguished are;
Her mutual Star
Reciprocates the Curfew.*

PANTALOOON: Over the golden-green lagoon
A faltering windblown fiddle tune
Faint and melancholy passes
Orchestrated by dodder-grasses.

PIERROT CONSOLES HIMSELF:

What is woman?
A thing of pleasure

A brittle cup
 With dew for treasure
 Worry and wide
 No sooner tasted
 Than to be tossed aside
 And wasted.

What is woman?
 A toy for leisure
 A sedative drop
 A night-time measure
 Worry and wide
 No sooner tested
 Than to be tossed aside
 And bested.

PANTALOOON: *Blown to the rippling afternoon . . . etc.*

. . . .

PUNCH: Leave these lovers, float away!
 Tragedies of Saturday
 Fade with rising of the moon.
 To your oar, my Pantaloon!

PANTALOOON: To the narrows and the weir?
 Where the jean and teagown veer?

PUNCH: They are no concern of yours.
 Pantaloon, pull on your oars!
 To your oar, my Pantaloon!
 From the bridge, the miller's daughter
 Spits to the peacock-feathered water,
 Aims at you, my Pantaloon!

PUNCH & PANTALOOON IN DUET:

Blown to the rippling afternoon . . . etc.

. . . .

PROMENADE

I.

Mr. David Gazebo,
 who hangs a Simeon Solomon,
 a Matisse of the pot-boiling period
 and a Delft dinner-service
 on the walls of his bedroom,
 sports his embroidered waistcoat
 at calculated distance from the oarsmen.

II.

Professors of Demotic Greek
 Claim a cowslip-bell they seek.
 For a search so out of season,
 Ram from the Indian Institute
 Praising Krishna on a flute
 Offers more convincing reason.

. . . .

IV.

The girl with ebony eyebrows
 Paddles a lone canoe.
 "Go it alone, young Morgan!"
 "Taa, Dai, over to you . . ."
 "Well, well, well, how *are* you?"
 (. . Moresque, '32 . .)
 "Sure! you know *me*, Warden . . ."
 "Bothered if I do . . .!"
 Another with amethyst earrings
 Teeters above the weir.
 "Trickey," thus Canon O'Malley.
 "Very," thus Fr. St. Pier . . .

. . . .

FINALE

*To the singing of madrigals and motets the Most
Exalted Lady enthroned in the Magdalen Meadows
accepts the twin crowns of Beauty and Learning.*

OXFORD, the very thought of thee
thought of thee
with favour fills the heart;
nostalgia apart
the flavour of thy noon
enchants me.

Meadows that by the Cherwell lie
Cherwell lie
with rhyming bells in part
harmonious in part:
their chiming out of tune
must haunt me.

Towers that from elms and roses rise
roses rise
in shadow part displayed,
deployed in shade
on meadow and lagoon
transport me.

Oh hours, that over water flow
water flow
and flowering ring with bells
and water bells:
from ringing hours too soon
you part me.

The editors regret that space limitations prevent *Shenandoah's* printing
Mr. Neame's suite in its entirety.

THE USES OF RHETORIC

JOHN KEATS: *On Milton*

I shall never become attach'd to a foreign idiom so as to put it into my writings. The *Paradise Lost* though so fine in itself is a corruption of our Language—it should be kept as it is unique—a curiosity—a beautiful and grand Curiosity. The most remarkable Production of the world. A northern dialect accommodating itself to greek and latin inversions and intonations. The purest english I think—or what ought to be the purest—is Chatterton's. The Language existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's gallicisms, and still the old words are used. Chatterton's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet. I have lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art—I wish to devote myself to another sensation.

Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 17-27 Sept. 1819, from *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. B. Forman, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1935).

DONALD DAVIE: *Notes on the later poems of Stevens*

1. His unrhymed strikingly regular decasyllabic lines make as it were a virtue of what one remembers as a fault from Johnson's *Irene* or Addison's *Cato*—the ache of the line for its rhyme: the rhyme denied gives the rhetorical effect of a difficult honesty, an open-ness towards what refuses to clip neatly home into the rhyme of a couplet or a quatrain.

2. The shameless ad-libbing ("In the air of newness of that element / In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness," or the notorious "zay-zay and azay, azay") is similarly an attempt to make an imperfection into the rhetorical sign of an honesty disdaining perfection.

3. When Rostrevor Hamilton wrote "The Tell-tale Article," what he found betraying in modern verse was the compulsive use

of the definite article. Just as persistent with Stevens is the indefinite, e.g.

It is the third commonness with light and air,
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing.

To say "a vigor" instead of "Vigour" avoids personification and all it implies. And this may arise from an honest refusal to generalise. But when, as with Stevens, it becomes a persistent mannerism, it is only the rhetorical equivalent of such a refusal and such honesty.

4. This vicious rhetoric which works by seeming anti-rhetorical is common to more modern poetry than one likes to admit. It most often takes the form (rare in Stevens) of a contrived hesitation and abruptness of rhythm.

5. The alternative is in Renaissance poetics as still operative through the 18th century, e.g., Dryden's account of the poet, "However good the thought may be, however apt the words in which 'tis couched, yet he finds himself at a little unrest, while rhyme is wanting; . . ." This is to see the rhetorical features of verse not as signs of an attitude in the poet, but as properties and adornments of the poem—not as expressive of the subject, but objective graces.

Donald Hall

THREE POEMS

Reflections of a Face

This billowing fish, my silver twin,
Swims in his flat aquarium,
And now delirium
Wheels on my nose, and flutters at my chin.

I built this fish and called him dear.
From colored light and flecks of sound
I molded him to round
Some crazy fragments to a sort of sphere.

It does not work. I stare at him,
Sea-serpent on the grounded brain;
In order to stay sane
I must become this fish, breaking the rim

Of glass whose cold and brittle line
Sunders me still from what I think.
I plunge; and now I drink
From that same pool. These fins, these gills are mine!



David Hume

"I dine, I play a game of backgammon,
I talk and I am merry with my friends.
Discourse of politics and art extends
To anecdote and mimicry and pun.
If later, when society is done,
I turn to work, where thought with thought contends,
Endeavor seems ridiculous, and sends
My body dumb to bed, the friend of none."

Who knows the sentence to unite the two?
Distinctions grow distincter. Now men drink
Most likely all night long to prove they think,
And in the morning write. What satisfies
A taste for nothingness will never do
To laugh at us when we are being wise.



The Beautiful Horses

That time we went to Suffolk Downs to see
The flattened gallop of the thoroughbred,
The Morning Telegraph was all I had
To help me bet, on past and pedigree.

But you declared that racing forms were rot.
Before each race, rapt at the paddock rail,
You valued every horse from nose to tail,
And bet upon the pleasure that you got.

Although our systems differed very greatly,
Our systems showed a singular conformance.
Maybe I knew, reading each Past Performance,
The quality you praised when they were stately.

Still, it was I who changed. That day, like Moses,
You led me to a place where I have settled,
Where horses graze on clover thickly petalled,
Beautiful winners, collared with bright roses.

For R. W.

William Hollis

MAY WE TOO NOT BECOME
THESE OLD MEN

?

And if we have not
 beautiful manners
may we not be
 (at least)
 gentle
with clear
 faded
 hands
and white hair
somewhat in need of
 trimming
and a gait
 slow and shuffling
and a quiet voice
 hesitating
in the appreciation
 of things
we have not had time for
 before

?

A cushioned chair
 in the garden
during the last warm days
 of the year
or a cold damp bed
 in winter:
We hesitate . . .
Let us grow old
 graciously
to the comforts of our minds
or not grow old
 at all.

BOOK REVIEWS

INTERPRETATIONS. Ed. by *John Wain*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1955.

THE LESS DECEIVED. By *Philip Larkin*. Marvell Press. 1956.

Interpretations is a series of essays by twelve young English critics, each analyzing a different poem; it is followed by an essay "On the Interpretation of the Difficult Poem" by G. S. Fraser, in the course of which four lines by Denham and a poem by William Empson are examined. An American is liable to wonder what all the shouting is about, unless he has kept in touch with literary England. In *Interpretations*, explication is explained and defended as an unaccepted method under attack. The partisanship displayed for close reading has not been seen on this side of the Atlantic for at least twenty years; presumably there was small point in an angry defence of the couplet in the heyday of Pope. (If, in sophisticated circles in the United States, criticism is no longer thought to reside largely in *explication de texte*, the text still dominates teaching in the colleges and many of the schools; in fact, it has become sometimes a convention as blunt, stupid and mechanical as any habit of criticism has ever been. Revolt was to be expected, but it has not yet been violent.)

An American's second thought might be that "new criticism" is a cultural export to the United Kingdom. When I went to Oxford in 1951, I was astonished to find an undergraduate organization called The Critical Society fighting with determination for the sanctity of the text. I thought at first that *Understanding Poetry* had just arrived at Blackwell's. Actually, as we all know, the modern interest in close reading began largely in England, particularly with I. A. Richards and his pupil William Empson. After them, it was kept alive underground, particularly by Dr. Leavis and *Scrutiny*. The young men of the Critical Society shared an admiration for Leavis and Empson, and it was from these two men in particular that their enthusiasms for interpretation sprang.

These students looked on the American new critics with some respect, but certainly without discipleship.

The difference in the critical climates of the two countries might be discovered, historically, in looking at *Scrutiny* and *Understanding Poetry*;—the first fiercely individual and catering to an elite which hated the literary gangs (thus inevitably bound up in the abhorred literary politics); and the second a persuasive, enthusiastic, often mistaken but generally right-headed, entirely popular school text. The effect of *Scrutiny* in its belligerence, though not its purpose, was to post Keep Out signs. The tradition of tweedy-chatty "I like good books" literary type is so strong in England that the "serious" literary men had perforce to hate anyone whose feeling for literature smacked of the frivolous, or who were not, it was judged, highly intelligent. It should not be forgotten that much of this literary war has a social origin, since literary activity in England can be a device of social climbing. It is small wonder that Dr. Leavis could be so belligerent and remain so angry.

Understanding Poetry faced no such vested interest, and won the field. It is a kind of do-it-yourself book, and its title is its meaning. Needless to say, it has done much good; it lends some literary sophistication at an early age, and it has seldom frightened anyone away. I studied it at high school, and I suspect that half of Americans who go to college are exposed to it. The result of its popularity (and the popularity of the movement that informed it; particularly the effect on teachers of *Practical Criticism*) has been to erect a cliché—a useful one, but all clichés can be dangerous. A literary sophomore at a good university is liable to take explication cynically, as a way to write papers. All you have to do is open a book to a poem, sit at the typewriter, and start mixing things up. At the end, tie together your contradictions as Irony and Paradox, and there's your "A-. Trifle weak on structure." If the sophomore remains literary, he may recover in later years the knowledge that explication can be handled properly and prove to be extremely useful. At any rate, he is liable to have learned a lot about reading despite his cynicism; he may have absorbed two

maxims: if you like a poem, it will pay you to read it hard; all poems are difficult.

Having learned a technique of reading, the reader seldom finds that an essay in explication of a given poem is much help. He may realize small things that had escaped him before, but the essay must be especially profound, and the poem especially complex, to make the paper of much value in itself. These *Interpretations*, which originally began as a series in *Mandrake* called "How to Read a Poem," mostly succeed only in demonstrating method; in England it is a lesson still largely to be learned. Here, where twenty pages explaining a poem you already understand seems boring, these essays often remind one how much more strenuous, and rewarding, is the Johnsonian process of summation and reasoned evaluation. Of course if the critic who generalizes has not first analyzed, his remarks will be relevant only through luck.

I have said that the purpose of this book is a demonstration of method. It should be noted that most of the explicatory critical books we honor, in particular Empson's three critical works, demonstrate not only method in reading but a part of a theory of poetry. These twelve critics are naturally not so cohesive as one man, and so their area of agreement is technical rather than theoretical. Despite all these qualifications, *Interpretations* is mostly a good book and a valuable one. It differs from much of the typical explication we encounter in the knowledge of literature most of the critics display. If they sometimes seem to me to misinterpret, it is not through ignorance. They all interpret in a context, insofar as knowledge of what words meant in 1600 may be considered a context for Shakespeare. They are not interested in any meaning, but in attempting to find the correct meaning or the accurate complex of meanings. They are, in short, responsible, unlike the American critic I once heard suggest that the first line of Yeats' "A Bronze Head," ("Here at right of the entrance this bronze head,") contained a political reference in the third word.

The best essay here, I think, is on "The Phoenix and the Turtle" by A. Alvarez. In this hard poem, explication is valuable because

it clarifies the particularly difficult. Alvarez manages to understand both the philosophical vocabulary which Shakespeare employs, and the specifically poetical complexities of the language. Alvarez has added the poem to my comprehension. L. D. Lerner does a good job on Marvell's "An Horation Ode," and Donald Davie an interesting, if unexpected, essay on "To a Waterfowl." Dennis Ward on "The Windhover" is a little too positive in his conclusions about a poem which is, I think, not entirely sure of its own conclusions. Iain Fletcher's lengthy article on Lionel Johnson's "The Dark Angel" does not say enough about literature in general to redeem the essayist from the charge of breaking a butterfly on a wheel. John Wain's rehearsal of "Among School Children," though I differ with him, is the best writing I have seen about that poem. Other subjects of discussion are *Macbeth*, "A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day," "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," "Christabel," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

G. S. Fraser's epilogue generalizes well. He takes explication seriously, as he should, but is more sophisticated than Mr. Wain in his introduction of the volume. After establishing the altogether necessary axiom that all poems are difficult if we look at them seriously, ("... it is almost impossible, even taking the simplest example, to state in general terms just what it is about a use of language that makes us recognize it as poetic.") and after defending explication generally, he appeals for a quality he calls "tact" in reading a poem, particularly a poem in the middle range of excellence, a quality dependent on social awareness. Finally, without any anti-intellectualism (Fraser has spent ten pages on the four lines of Denham), he ends with a caveat which deserves reprinting in full:

The reader gets from a great poem what he can bring to it; and though there are many kinds of poem in which it is important that the reader should bring an adroit responsiveness to verbal play, a dexterity in seizing nuances, it is always more important that he should bring what one can only call experience of life and openness to life, depth and humility. I hope that this book of examples of close criticism will enable many readers to look at poetry in a more flexible and alert way. I hope, however, also, that it will not set an intellectual fashion of the wrong sort;

and that readers will not come to value poems less for what they are than for the ingenuity of the remarks that may be made about them. There are great moments in all poetry that will not, in the last resort, 'bear analysis'; their springs are too deep, and what they touch off in us is too deep; we should explain what we can explain, for a false mysteriousness, a cult of mystery for its own sake, is detestable; but we should also be ready at all times to say, 'This is splendid and moving, this line concentrates the poem, the poem turns on this line; I can see that, and you should be able to see it; but I cannot tell you why.'

Fraser, presumably, has followed American criticism more closely than his younger colleagues.

The Less Deceived, by Philip Larkin, I have saved till now for a treat, and because it illustrates a development of poetry in England analogous to the course of criticism in *Interpretations*. It, too, might seem to have gone American, but again its sources are mostly British. The modish poem by the young English poet now (excluding, in fact, some of the best) is regular in form and problem-solving in strategy, like its American counterpart. Many of the critics in *Interpretations* are these poets—A. Alvarez, Donald Davie, John Wain, and L. D. Lerner—and many of them like American poets are university teachers; their academic positions, however, result from no academic attempt at patronage, but from a climbing of the usual ladders of scholarship.

Some of these men, and others, have been cohesive enough in the eyes of some journalists to be named The Group; and The Group is held together by a desire to write cerebral poetry, by a toughness that distrusts emotion (hating Stephen Spender with a passion that surpasses belief) and, most important and visible, an admiration for the poetry of William Empson. This influence has sometimes been slavish imitation, but in general has been a good thing, and the dosage of wit and intelligence and learning has made for some good contemporary poems.

Mr. Larkin is either on the fringes of The Group or represents some of its qualities independently. I would say that he has been able to learn from the toughness and cerebration in the air without succumbing to imitation of the source, and without

feeling it necessary always to be tough or cerebral. If he has any relation to The Group at all, he is the best poet to come out of it. Another fine poet, Thom Gunn, has been accused of Empsonianism on the basis of a few early poems, and may also be in a position of having borrowed, or learned, from Empson and his followers. In Larkin's book, there is I think only one Empsonian line, "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs." Other poems, like "Whatever Happened?" are constructed along lines reminiscent of Empson, but I think that Larkin has in fact learned more from Robert Graves than from any other poet.

The job of a reviewer is presumably first to describe and summarise, and then to display. Display should be easy, and convincing, but to describe or summarize Mr. Larkin's work is difficult. It has no particular stylistic innovations or idiosyncrasies, and no continual preoccupations or obsessions—no protuberance of system or style for the critic to hang his hat on. He is a slow and careful writer, who makes few mistakes, and seems to write his poems one at a time, infrequently, with small overlapping of subject matter. He is not a minor poet trying to trick himself into majority with a specious system. When he does write, he writes very well indeed, pinning down the attitude or decision of the poem with a reasoned and resonant exactness.

Usually he generalizes on an habitual activity of his own, and, by extension, of others. He muses in a seemingly careless way, but structures his poems eventually with that directed indirection that Yeats used to such perfection. If we can name a prevalent tone, it is in the line of "Church Going," where, having told of a particular occasion when he saw an old church and stopped by it, he writes with an air of discovery. "Yet stop I did; in fact I often do." For tone the operating phrase is "in fact"; there is in his poems often the sudden confrontation of the narrator with a fact about himself which appears common, but whose significance had not been understood. "Church Going" (whose title is ironic; it is not a Sunday) ends:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.

And that much never can be obsolete,
 Since someone will forever be surprising
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,
 And gravitating with it to this ground,
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
 If only that so many dead lie round.

I wonder if it is coincidence that I seem to find, in this poem and in others, some of the feeling of Robert Frost.

In *Toads*, Larkin begins,

Why should I let the toad *work*
 Squat on my life?
 Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
 And drive the brute off?

and ends, having learned something:

For something sufficiently toad-like
 Squats in me, too;
 Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
 And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
 My way to getting
 The fame and the girl and the money
 All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other
 One's spiritual truth;
 But I do say it's hard to lose either,
 When you have both.

Most poems in this country that end well manage it by technical means; the metaphor enlarges, is twisted, turns around, eats its own tail. Our response is a long low whistle, and we may turn to the next poem confidently expecting another thrill. With Larkin (need I say that it happens here too, and with other poets in England?) something has happened by the end of the poem. The successes of his last stanzas depend not entirely on skill, but on the intellection that has solved a problem.

The last poem in this book, "At Grass," is not cerebral or tough, and it finally attributes human feeling to horses (it might so be considered the perfect anti-Group poem) but seems to me

thoroughly to work, with a quietness of emotion that seldom earns such a response. Larkin is talking about old race horses put out to pasture; "... they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy,
And not a fieldglass sees them home,
Or curious stop-watch prophecies:
Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

With Fraser I can say, "I can see that, and you should be able to see it; but I cannot tell you why."

DONALD HALL

RECENT FICTION

Of all the novels under consideration here, the worst is Mr. Robert Ruark's sanguinary thriller about the Mau Mau, *Something of Value* (Doubleday). Aside from Mr. Ruark's style (an abortive cross between Hemingway and, say, Kathleen Norris) and embarrassingly maudlin characterization, this huge and, I think, middling-honest book should stand as a permanent example of the artistic disaster awaiting the writer who attempts to invoke physical horror without having provided himself the technical means of controlling it; he is like the bungling magician who finds himself devoured by his djinn. The same problem has nagged better writers than Mr. Ruark, of course, and some of them, like Flaubert in *Salammbô*, have solved it well.

Mr. William Hoffman unfortunately has not, and some of the war scenes in *The Trumpet Unblown* (Doubleday) amount simply to a surfeiting accretion of dreadful detail; the fact that it all happened will not, by itself, make it work in fiction. What is wanted, I suppose, is a Stendhalian impressionism, the kind of rigorous precision and selectivity that makes possible the extremely effective battle scenes in Caroline Gordon's *None Shall Look Back*, or Evelyn Waugh's wonderfully spare rendition of the Cretan disaster in *Officers and Gentlemen*. I am also a little disturbed

by Mr. Hoffman's conclusion—in which his returned soldier finds himself no longer able to communicate with family and friends—which for some reason rings hollow; but Hemingway, whom Mr. Hoffman plainly has read, has written one of his flattest sketches on the same subject; and there may indeed be something inherently intractable about such material. What difficulties Mr. Hoffman has are largely technical (he has, for one thing, enough “experience” here for several books), and they have not kept him from writing a novel that is deeply felt, always interesting, and sometimes powerful.

Miss Elizabeth Hardwick's forte is cool, clear-eyed, ironic observation. *The Simple Truth* (Harcourt, Brace) concerns the reaction of her two protagonists to the trial of a college student for the murder of his sweetheart; both these stultified intelligences represent vested emotional interests, the aesthetic and the social, and neither of them, we eventually realize, actually cares about the student's innocence or guilt. This fact, plus the fallibility of juries, would seem to constitute the “truth” of the title, and it is pretty simple. As to the use of her deliberately vague characters, Miss Hardwick had at least two possibilities: she could have treated them with a sufficiently animating sympathy, or she could have whipped them into monsters subject to satire; but as they stand, they seem curiously lifeless, and we are left to enjoy the sharply projected Iowa background.

As usual, Miss Mary McCarthy elects for monsters, and in *A Charmed Life* (Harcourt, Brace) she presents us with a whole artists' colony of them. In most ways Miss McCarthy is an admirable writer, perceptive, tough, witty, a little diabolical; but in this novel she fails to engage her people, brilliantly realized as some of them are, in any meaningful action. The action they do engage in, culminating in the heroine's gratuitous death, appears remarkably pointless—on anybody's terms, even their own. But despite its static quality, the book has good things, including true stylistic vigor and a villain named Myles Murphy who is, as one of the characters accurately describes him, downright “prodigious.”

Mr. Samuel Beckett, an intensely serious and generally funny

writer, is concerned to render unaccommodated man, the thing itself, stripped equally of social affiliation and the ability to conceptualize, and locked in a microcosm of fading sensation. *Molloy* (Grove), like *En Attendant Godot*, is divided into two sections, apparently about two separate individuals, each appearing to repeat the same diminishing pattern under slightly altered conditions; but it is possible that the first section represents a continuation, in inverted order, of the second, and that both narrators are the same personality caught at various stages of a progressive collapse. The events are naturally obscure, but Mr. Beckett illuminates his darkling landscape with a fitful and tricky intensity, like swamp-fire; the tonal monotony inherent in his deliberately limited range alternates with prose of poetic vigor and precision. Although *Molloy* for pages at a time is murky going, Mr. Beckett remains a writer of striking originality.

Mr. Nigel Dennis' *Cards of Identity* (Vanguard) has the air of being essentially a rewrite of Lewis' *The Apes of God*, handsomely bound in charcoal and pink and aimed at the collective taste of *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and Mr. W. H. Auden, all of whom have praised it in highest terms. The praise is deserved; a more devastating satire on the disintegrated personality, and its corollary aberrations, could hardly be imagined; and yet the fictional interest is slight, becoming practically non-existent after the first hundred pages. As individually winning as are the papers read by the members of the Identity Club, their total effect clogs the narrative, and our interest finally settles on Mr. Dennis' acute perceptivity. Perhaps it's merely that his book is too long for what it has to say.¹

I want to do justice to Mr. Oakley Hall, whose *Mardios Beach* (Viking) is an extremely competent naturalistic novel. Mr. Hall offers the reader a full and very much up-to-date cross-section of, one supposes, a representative segment of California society. He has

¹I would not say that Mr. William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (Harcourt, Brace) is too long, but it is certainly too long to be decently reported on here; but I may add that it was recommended to me by Mr. Ezra Pound and is currently being read by Miss Flannery O'Connor.

a gift for tight but expressive plotting. His characters—who are of an impressive variety—exist as both types and individuals, though in a restricted way. None of them, unfortunately, are at all intelligent, and the one “intellectual” character is an unintentional parody, almost as sad as the classic case presented, with similar seriousness, by Clifford Odets in *The Big Knife*. But what I chiefly miss in Mr. Hall’s book is any feeling whatsoever for language, any way with words. The most random paragraph from *Mardios Beach*, taken alone, would serve as a cruel take-off on naturalistic prose at its flattest; and the context doesn’t help much either. As Leslie Fiedler has well said, certain naturalistic writers, notably those who think of themselves as the heirs of Dreiser, write badly *on principle*; and it may be part of Mr. Hall’s honesty to so write. *Mardios Beach* seems, in every way, a completely honest book.

There is nothing flat about the prose of Mr. Herbert Gold; when he errs, as he sometimes does, it is on the side of exuberance. *The Man Who Was Not With It* (Atlantic-Little, Brown) has the kind of thematic substance that informs major fiction. The narrator is a young carnival barker who is able, in fact forced, to break a “five dollar habit” by the aid of an older friend, a barker named Grack, who later falls victim to the same addiction, turning mean as a consequence. The point of loyalty at issue here is, I think, a fairly subtle one, and Mr. Gold shrewdly records the narrator’s growing exasperation with his benefactor gone baulky; the young man determines, however, despite a new and urgent loyalty to a pregnant wife, to do the best he can for his friend—even though this turns out to be merely carting him back to the border of his native Canada, where he is arrested simply trying to cross over. But the narrator’s responsibility (as Grack, already in the hands of the border officials, signals to him with a weighted wink) has been fulfilled. Mr. Gold has an unusually acute grasp of character which distinguished his two earlier novels as well as this one—and a sound sense of narrative. His version of the carnival lingo, as far as one who has never been with it can tell, is remarkably authentic; but it is unfortunately, like the special patois it

reproduces, also a little spurious. The only serious blemish in Mr. Gold's otherwise strong book is a tendency to substitute passages of such rhetoric for events and characters, admittedly minor, that fail to be completely realized.

Mr. Harvey Swados' first novel, *Out Went the Candle* (Viking), is not altogether an easy book to talk about, particularly if you must do it briefly. There are a number of unsatisfactory things about it, but none of them seem in the least to matter. Mr. Swados' style can on occasion be awkward, even gauche (the figurative business toward the end, about Joe's being impaled on Betsy's brave and brittle lance—even granting the possibility of a Freudian pun—I especially stick at); but the general flow of his prose is so smooth, so accomplished, so unobtrusively effective as to reduce minor complaints to carping.

Mr. Swados operates expertly within the naturalistic conventions that for the most part he accepts, but the book's underlying conception is on the grand scale. The analogy with *Lear* (the "decomposition" theme, each child embodying aspects of the father) suggested by the title is there, all right, but it is not offered wistfully (as such things often are) in the hope of gaining for the book an unearned reverberation or two. Mr. Swados' book is solidly his own, and stands by itself.

Out Went the Candle is built around the relation of Herman Felton, a small-time financial wizard first made and then humbled by the war, to his troubled children, Betsy and Morrow. The central intelligence, a device Mr. Swados uses with some consistency, belongs to Joe Burley, a typically cynical and self-conscious newspaperman attracted by Betsy; and there are many minor characters, the most striking of whom is Betsy's private parasite, one Benton (Bunty) Traynor, a genteel, ruthless and pathetic monster. The book is powerfully dominated by Herman Felton himself; his letters to Betsy, both in themselves and as a trick of characterization, are excellent. Many of the characters, especially Morrow and Joe Burley, seem borrowed from the common storehouse of 20th Century fiction; but Mr. Swados knows them so well, affectionately but not sentimentally, and projects them so fully that

they have their own persuasive existence. It should finally be said, perhaps, that Mr. Swados has some trouble plotting, that his novel sometimes shoots off onto tangents; but he always manages, though occasionally with a heave, to bring it back on the point. The best thing about Mr. Swados (aside from such non-literary matters as his conviction that his people, even people in general, are worthwhile, and worth the trouble of writing well about) is his fully developed ability to structure a scene dramatically—to convey tangibly the feeling of dynamic give-and-take between live persons. This is an ability sufficiently rare, I take it, to justify my belief that Mr. Swados is a writer of genuine importance.

When the first novels of John Wain, Kingsley Amis, and Iris Murdoch appeared in England within a year of one another, there seemed to be abundant reason to speak of these writers as a group. Each was characterized by high spirits, a cinematographic technique, and a flair for comedy; each made a shrewd and knowing use of picaresque conventions. Mr. Wain's *Born in Captivity* and Miss Murdoch's *Under the Net* were, in fact, true picaresque novels—though with the form modified suitably to serve the authors' respective purposes; and if Mr. Amis' *Lucky Jim* was not picaresque in structure, it did appear to appropriate picaresque elements, especially in the characterization of Jim Dixon himself. But now with the publication of their second novels, their essential dissimilarities become more readily apparent, and must be insisted upon.²

Lucky Jim was a wildly plotted, wildly funny novel, its tone varying from burlesque to a muted seriousness that didn't, perhaps, quite mesh with the farce; this seriousness was most evident in the episodes concerning Dixon's ambiguous affair with an unattractive lady lecturer at his provincial university. Mr. Amis' new novel, *That Uncertain Feeling* (Harcourt, Brace³), is not, I regret to say,

²The special quality of John Wain is discussed by Mr. Chaucer elsewhere in this issue.

³I heartily wish that Harcourt, Brace and Company, one of the best of American publishers, would stop binding their novels, however handsomely, in *paper* so tender that it will scarcely bear up under the most gentle handling. One shudders to think how fast some of their recent products would go in general library use.

as much fun as his first one, but it is in other respects a superior work. The underlying seriousness barely hinted at in *Lucky Jim* dominates the tone and, because of a high degree of control, makes the comedy, which is considerable, that much more assured. In rough terms, the book is based on the conflict between the narrator John Lewis, an underpaid Welsh under-librarian, and the "Anglicized Aberdarcy bourgeoisie," whom he despises stoutly in principle and generally in practice. The link between them is the seductive wife of the chairman of the local library committee, who tempts Lewis by offering to influence her husband to get Lewis a promotion; that isn't the only way, of course, that she tempts him—who is the struggling father of two children. Lewis falls, but we gather he learns several lessons from it, including one that makes him forego his promotion and return to his wife and to the colliery background he came from.

English critics (some of whom appear to take the matter rather personally) have been quick to point out that in Mr. Amis' fiction there is a class issue at stake, a point which the provincial American reader (such as the present reviewer) is apt, though not to overlook, at least not to be *that* impressed by. Still other critics, including Mr. James Stern, have been similarly dismayed because many of Amis' characters, by traditional class standards, are pretty unsavoury. Such an emphasis seems to me to be badly off the point. It ought to be obvious that Mr. Amis is a satirist who sees his characters far more clearly than his commentators appear to, and that, moreover, the issues really at stake are human and moral ones that, despite their being expressed partially in class terms, amount to more than those terms. But anyone at all, I should think, must be impressed by Mr. Amis' deft writing, his wit, and his real knack for the comic situation.

When I come to the two novels of Miss Iris Murdoch, I begin to wish that I had space and time to do an article. Since I have not, I will record my conviction that, among the several writers discussed here (and leaving Beckett aside as a special case), Miss Murdoch is by far the most finished artist. The best of modern fiction has many difficult lessons to teach, but it is evident, I believe, that

she has mastered all of them that, for her particular purposes, she needs to know. She is also, on the evidence of her books, a little fey.

Under the Net (Viking) is told by Jake Donaghue, a one-time creative writer turned translator (the latter activity involves less expense of spirit) who finds himself thrown out of a free lodging—thrown back, that is, on his own resources. Trying to locate a new, equally inexpensive place to live and, by extension, to locate himself, he makes a systematic pilgrimage, ranging from London to Paris and back, to see his old friends, each of whom, one gathers, represents a currently going philosophical system—or pseudo-system. This flagrant use of “ideas” is apparently a dangerous literary strategy; in *A Fable*, which is liable to serve for a long time as Horrible Example it defeated Mr. Faulkner almost completely. That Miss Murdoch is not unaware of the peril involved is shown by her book on Sartre,⁴ where she writes that our judgment of a novelist will depend “on *how* he incarnates his viewpoint in a literary medium, although to put it thus is misleading if it suggests that the particular viewpoint exists apart from its incarnation.” As one “system” after another fails Jake, he comes finally to experience the “shiver” of human possibility, the knowledge that there are many things which may be, as he puts it, “one of the wonders of the world.”

To so describe *Under the Net*, of course, is to betray the “incarnation,” the scenes and characters set vividly before us on the page; it is especially to betray Miss Murdoch’s gift for wry and touching comedy, ranging from the farcial through the satiric to the quietly touching. Both her novels are constructed and written in the way we mostly think of poems as being written (which isn’t to say there is any fake poetry in them), and need to be explicated on that level.

Miss Murdoch’s second novel, *The Flight from the Enchanter* (Viking), is a good deal more complicated than the first, but no less artfully done. This time the author uses a shifting point of

⁴This valuable study (*Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Yale) has the virtue, unusual in criticism, of being more interesting than its subject.

view, encompassing a variety of characters, each of whom is defined partially by his relationship with the others, but more particularly by that with the "enchanter" himself, Mischa Fox, a journalistic czar of unspecified European origin and distinguished physically by having one eye brown and one eye blue. The result is a curious structure in which the problems of a character raised in a chapter are often by that chapter's end dropped, leaving us to infer the resolution indirectly as the narrative moves on. The fascination Mischa Fox exerts on a truly singular group of people lies in their having invested in him their deepest needs—or blackest fears—so that they constantly fancy themselves fleeing from (or towards) him at his will. Their flight continues until events, or an ubiquitous *ficelle* named Calvin Blick (no one ever recalls the color of *his* eyes), have revealed to them another, perhaps more final reality. It is an old trick to make one character seem imposing by having the other characters speculate about him; it is not so easy to make that character be impressive in himself, but Miss Murdoch does it—by showing us Mischa Fox in enigmatic but comprehensible action. We realize, even before the end, that he is no more enigmatic than his friends, or rather we realize that they are as enigmatic as he. *The Flight from the Enchanter* is founded (to borrow again from the book on Sartre) on Miss Murdoch's own deep "apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other."

THOMAS H. CARTER

LIVING IN THE PRESENT. By John Wain. Secker & Warburg. 1955.

With his second novel Mr. Wain has reached an impasse: how can he make his gift for comic improvisation serve any serious purpose? In his first one, *Born in Captivity* (Knopf), the picaresque convention proved to be fairly reliable; it worked for him as it did for Mr. Saul Bellow's *Augie March*. But here the action has to turn full circle, as it were, and the improvisation falters somewhat well before the end is in sight. He starts out with a splendid situation. Edgar Banks, a seedy young schoolmaster, profoundly

impressed by the "insupportable ennui" of post-war London, decides to do himself in. Before this event can take place, however, he will murder the most offensive person of his acquaintance, the neo-fascist Rollo Philipson-Smith. His first attempt at assassination is a crashing failure. He follows his victim to Geneva, and proceeds to fall in with a disorderly crew who complicate his original scheme beyond much chance of success. (Up to this point I was hoping it would be a spoof on *Under Western Eyes*.)

Even before Geneva the serious theme of the novel has begun to assert itself. Edgar figures himself looking at the world behind plate glass: "And yet, and yet . . . these people had something in their lives, something important which he could not see but whose presence he could feel." Such moments are always the cue for a meditation on the "hampering link of kindness and goodwill that held him back from suicide." Unfortunately, this sort of reflection, however generous in its sympathy, numbs the comic sense. You can see it gaining on Mr. Wain and finally all but smothering his best instincts. The final scene, back in London, reassembles the "good" characters in a most appalling display of altruism:

Holding her to him, gazing eagerly over her shoulder at the darkness, Edgar gave a long, silent shudder of laughter at his own happiness as he thought of the bad yesterdays and the wonderful tomorrows. It was over. He was tired of living in the present.

This is no way to manage comedy: incongruity is its life.

It would appear that Mr. Wain is writing a kind of novel which lies somewhere between the best Arnold Bennett (the accurate social documentation suggests this) and the early Waugh, who of course did things in rather different ways. Here the mixed genre betrays some uncertainty of purpose. It will do no good to snub Mr. Wain's rude groping heroes, as Mr. Somerset Maugham did lately. On the contrary, I find them rather likable, and their social mobility is surely good for high fictional purpose these days. Indeed, we have two recent examples of the first order, Mann's *Felix Krull* and Wyndham Lewis' *Vulgar Streak*. The funeral scene in the latter novel is a brilliant comic exploitation of Mr.

Wain's London; but Mr. Lewis never relaxes his gaze, and in the end the human pathos is all the more powerful. I shall expect Mr. Wain to work up to something like that before long.

DANIEL CHAUCER

CONTRIBUTORS

HARRIS DOWNEY, who lives in the country near Baton Rouge, has had stories in Martha Foley's *Best Stories* and the O. Henry *Prize Stories*. A former reporter, teacher, and soldier, he now devotes his time to writing.

MARIANNE MOORE, one of the foremost contemporary poets, collects miniature animals. Viking will publish some of her verse not hitherto collected this Fall.

HUGH KENNER'S book, *Dublin's Joyce*, will be reviewed in a later *Shenandoah*.

ALAN NEAME is preparing a collection of his poetry for publication.

JOHN KEATS anticipated Pound and Eliot in his remarks on Milton.

DONALD DAVIE is one of the leading British poet-critics.

WILLIAM HOLLIS has been working at the Free University of Brussels on a Fulbright Grant under the French critic, Emilie Noulet. At present in the Army at Washington, D. C., he is completing a volume of poetry, *Tirthankara*. He graduated from Washington and Lee in 1953.

ROBERT O. BOWEN, author of three novels and a textbook, *Practical Prose Studies*, is currently Fiction Editor of *The Western Review*. He has published widely in the quarterlies.

DONALD HALL'S first volume of poetry, *Exiles and Marriages*, received critical acclaim.

DANIEL CHAUCER, a regular contributor, has lately been making his annual pilgrimage to Ainsworth Baths, Virginia.

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